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ABSTRACT

To investigate the effect of sex stereotyping on their news stories, 65 journalism students were asked to write a two-page news story on the basis of information packets about a new appointee. They also listed further questions for the appointee and suggested pictures to accompany the story. In one experimental condition the appointee was male and in the other the appointee was female. Differences in the content of the stories, questions, and pictures due to the sex of the reporter and the sex of the newsmaker were tested using two-way analyses of variance. The blatant stereotyping predicted was not found. However, student reporters included more assertions about job qualifications when writing about the male appointee and asked the female appointee more questions about sex role and more factual questions about the position. A factor analysis produced five factors, including one that presented the newsmaker as well rounded and qualified; this pattern was present more often when the appointee was male. There were no significant differences based on the sex of the reporter. (Author/AA)

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Sex Stereotypes and Reporting

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Sex Stereotyping and Reporting

A number of studies support the complaint of feminists that the mass media present a stereotyped image of women. Researchers have found that women are cast in traditional roles in TV commercials, magazine advertisements, TV programs, films, textbooks, and magazines.

An outline of that image emerges from a brief review of some of these studies. Dominick and Rauch found women more likely than men to be associated with kitchen, bathroom, and personal hygiene products in TV commercials.[1] In a review sex-role research, Busby concluded, "females in television advertising are associated with domesticity and submissiveness while males are associated with more worldly roles and dominance."[2] A study of general audience magazine ads by Courtney and Lockeretz produced similar results. They reported that no women were shown in professional or top level business roles. Most of the women in the ads were confined to the home.[3]

A similar image prevails in television entertainment programs designed for both adults and children. Tedesco's study of sex roles in prime-time television showed males cast more often than females in serious roles. Tedesco said male characters were depicted as more "powerful, smart, rational, and stable" than females, while females were depicted as more "attractive, fair, sociable, warm, happy, peaceful, and youthful" than males.[4]

McNeil found that marital and parental status were mentioned more often for females than for males and that females in TV programs tended to be more occupied with personal than professional problems.[5] Downing also found a lack of professional concerns among female characters in television's daytime serials. Fifty-eight percent of the males were categorized as professionals compared to only 19 percent of the females.[6] Seggar reported that females in television

programs were less likely than males to be competent in performance of tasks.[7]

TV programs aimed at children also present a stereotyped image of women. Busby said males were shown as more knowledgeable, independent, aggressive, logical, and less emotional than females.[8] Long and Simon supported the conclusion that women in children's and family TV programs were cast in traditional family roles.[9]

Although few studies have concentrated on the effects of this media content, there is evidence that it has an impact, at least on children. After reviewing this literature, Busby concludes that "Sex of the media user is an important factor in the user's utilization and recall of media content," that "Youngsters model behavior they see in the media," and that "Youngsters use media to gain insight into roles they will fill in later life."[10]

There is also evidence of sex bias in news media content. Monica Morris found sparse coverage of women's liberation news in two United States and two British newspapers.[11]

Susan Miller content analyzed photos appearing in the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. She said that men dominated the pictures, and that photos of women showed them as spouses and socialites rather than professionals.[12] Jean Ward pointed out sexist language appearing in journalistic writing.[13]

These studies raise the question of whether stereotyped image affects the information that reporters gather and include in news stories about women. The literature about perception might lead to such an expectation. Bruner says people tend to categorize objects or persons on the basis of only a few of many attributes. He says they may ignore attributes that do not fit into the category[14] Thus, the reporter might include in a news story information that supported a stereotyped image of women and ignore information that did not.

This study explored the effects of the sex of a newsmaker on treatment of stories by student reporters. The young journalists were given packets of information about the appointment of a person to the position of public relations director for a California school district. In one condition the person appointed

was a male, and in the other the person was female. With the exception of a name change, the information in the packets was identical. The subjects were told to write a story about the appointment, devise a list of questions to ask the appointee and to list three pictures to accompany the story.

The hypotheses for this study were drawn from the image of women outlined in the related studies section above. It was predicted that student reporters would categorize a female newsmaker on the basis of sex then seek out and include information to support that categorization.

News Story Hypotheses. News stories written by student reporters are likely to:

1. Include more assertions about job qualifications when the newsmaker is male. (Professional competency does not fit the student reporters' stereotype of women. Thus, they are likely to ignore the information about the female newsmaker's qualifications for the position.)

2. Include more assertions about work experience and schooling when the newsmaker is male. (Same rationale as hypothesis 1.)

3. Include more assertions about personal worth when the newsmaker is male. (The student reporters' stereotype of women pictures them as less knowledgeable, independent, rational, and competent than males. Thus, they are less likely to view the female as a valuable professional asset to the school district.)

4. Include more negative assertions about the need for the position when the newsmaker is female. (Because student reporters are less likely to picture the female as a competent professional, they are less likely to see the position as having value to the community when a female is appointed to it.)

5. Include more assertions about sex role when writing about the female newsmaker. (The female stereotype associates the female closely with marriage, home, and children. Thus, the student reporters are more likely to attend to this type of information when writing about females.)

6. Mention marriage more often when the newsmaker is female. (Same rationale as hypothesis 5.)

7. Include more assertions about personality when the newsmaker is female. (The female is stereotyped as warm, sociable, and dependent. Thus, student reporters will be more attuned to this type of information when writing about the female.)

8. Include more assertions about leisure activities and community participation when the newsmaker is female. (Same rationale as hypothesis 7.)

Question Hypotheses. Student reporters are more likely to:

9. Ask questions about qualifications for the job when the newsmaker is female. (Because student reporters are less likely to think of the female as a competent professional, they are more likely to be concerned about her ability to handle the job.)

10. Ask questions about how the source will handle the job when the newsmaker is male. (Student reporters are less likely to be concerned about whether the male can handle the job; therefore, they are more likely to deal with the fundamental journalistic concern of what an appointee intends to do in the position.)

11. Question the need for the position when the newsmaker is female. (Because the student reporters are less likely to picture the female as a competent professional, they are less likely to see the position as having value to the community.)

12. Ask questions about sex roles and the job when the newsmaker is female. (The female stereotype associates the female more closely with marriage, home, and children.)

13. Ask questions about spouse, children, and family when the newsmaker is female. (Same rationale as hypothesis 12.)

14. Ask factual questions about the job or job issues when the newsmaker is male. (The female stereotype pictures the female as less knowledgeable and competent than the male. Thus, student reporters are likely to see these types of questions as having less value when posed for female newsmakers.)

15. Ask for opinions about contemporary job issues when the newsmaker is male. (For the reason cited in hypothesis 14, the female opinion would be valued less.)

16. Ask questions about outside interests, hobbies, or community activities when the newsmaker is female. (This type of information would fit the stereotype of the female as sociable, warm, and dependent.)

Picture Hypotheses. Student reporters will choose:

17. More pictures of the male newsmaker in the office alone. (The female stereotype pictures females as more dependent than males. Thus, she is more likely to be with others.)

18. More pictures of the female newsmaker with a group, excluding children, in a school setting. (Same rationale as for hypothesis 17.)

19. More pictures of the female newsmaker with school children. (The female stereotype associates the female with children and home.)

20. More pictures of the female newsmaker with the family. (Same rationale as hypothesis 19.)

(Picture Hypotheses Continued)

21. More pictures of the female newsmaker engaged in leisure or community activities. (The female is viewed as more sociable than the male.)

No differences based on the sex of the reporter were predicted. Because socialization into male and female roles is pervasive and begins at a very early age, male and female students were expected to hold the same stereotype of women. Thus, female reporters were expected to write the same types of stories, ask the same types of questions, and choose the same types of pictures as males.

Method

Sixty-five male and female students enrolled in four sections of an undergraduate writing and reporting class at Stanford University served as subjects. Each class was assigned randomly to a condition for the sex of the news source.

In a 2 x 2 independent-measure experimental design, (A) the sex of the newsmaker was varied with (B) the sex of the news writer.

Procedure

The experiment was designed to resemble a typical exercise in the reporting class. Each student was given an instruction sheet explaining the assignment and a five-page packet of material from which to work.

The packet contained a two-page press release which announced that a person had been appointed to the newly-created position, director of public relations for the Palo Alto Unified School District. The press release outlined the appointment procedure, mentioned that the appointee was married, listed the spouse's job and listed some information about their two children. The release included quotes from the school superintendent praising the appointee.

The information packet also contained a one-page resume for the appointee that

listed degrees and a series of reporting and public relations jobs. It also mentioned outside activities such as organic gardening, hiking, and membership in church and amateur theatre groups.

A one-page fact sheet about Palo Alto school district listed administrators and contained information about boundaries and the demographic makeup of the school district.

The final two pages carried reaction to the appointment from the appointee, the spouse, a board of education member, the PTA council president, the president of the taxpayer's association and the president of the teacher's union.

The instruction sheet outlined a three-part exercise for the students. First, they were given 45 minutes to write a two-page story using the information packet. Then they were asked to develop 15 to 20 questions to ask the appointee during an interview for a follow-up story and to suggest three pictures to accompany the story. Subjects were given one hour and 15 minutes to complete parts two and three.

The stories were then content analyzed to determine the mean number of pictures, questions, or in the case of the news stories--assertions--that fell into each content category.

The category system was identical to the list of hypotheses. Information was included in the information packet to provide assertions for each content category should the writer decide to use it.

The coding unit in the news stories was the assertion, and the context unit was the paragraph in which the assertion appeared. The questions and picture choices were simply coded in the appropriate categories and tabulated.

The instructions, information packet, and category system were pretested with a reporting class similar to the classes used in the actual experiment.

Scott's formula was used to test for inter-coder reliability. Agreement for stories was .85 and for questions it was .86. There was perfect agreement in categorizing the photographs.

The data were analyzed using two-way analysis of variance with each category of assertion, question, or picture treated as a separate dependent variable. The data also were submitted to a principal components factor analysis and varimax rotation.

Results

Analysis of variance of the 21 dependent variables representing the hypotheses resulted in four significant differences. However, only eight of the differences between means were in the predicted direction, (See table 1.) and a Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test for the table was not significant. Thus, the differences reported may be the result of chance and caution should be used in their interpretation.

Only one assertion category for the news stories was statistically significant. (See table 2). There was a source main effect for assertions that the newsmaker was qualified for the job. As predicted in hypothesis 1, subjects were more likely to mention qualifications when the newsmaker was male. The qualification assertions used in the stories tended to deal with other persons' opinions about the appointee's qualities and included statements that the appointee was a "natural for the job," would "relate well to the community," was "highly recommended" and had the "skills and experience" for the job.

Three categories of questions produced significant differences. Reporters were more likely to ask the female source questions about sex roles and the job. (See table 3.) This is in the direction of hypothesis 12. The questions centered on effects the newsmaker's sex might have on the job and problems she might experience while trying to pursue a career and raise a family.

Subjects also displayed a greater tendency to ask female newsmakers factual questions about the job. (See table 4.) This goes against the prediction in hypothesis 14. These questions tended to probe responsibilities and possible

limitations of the appointee. For example, some reporters asked about access to the school board and whether the board had placed any limitations on the appointee.

There was an interaction for the category of questions about leisure and community interests. (See table 5.) Females tended to ask more questions of this type to the female newsmaker and males posed these questions more often for the male newsmaker. This was unexpected.

It should also be noted that analysis of variance of the dependent variables produced no significant differences for sex of writer. With the exception of the interaction above, males and females tended to use the same types of assertions, ask the same types of questions, and choose the same types of pictures.

Several solutions were inspected for the factor analysis of the dependent variables, but a five-factor solution was chosen for presentation. Five factors produced the greatest number of variables most obviously associated with a particular factor, and resulted in the greatest number of variables with loadings above .40 on each factor. The factors account for 47.2 percent of the total variance. (See table 6.)

The first factor was a personality-outside activity cluster that included assertions about the newsmaker's personality, pictures of the newsmaker engaged in leisure or community activities, and questions about these outside activities. This set of variables was associated negatively with pictures of the newsmaker in a group.

The second factor was a group of variables that seemed to picture the newsmaker as well-rounded. It included assertions about qualifications for the job, assertions that the newsmaker was married, assertions about leisure and community activities, and pictures of the appointee with school children.

The third factor showed a job orientation. This included both assertions and questions about the need for the new position, questions about job issues and questions about how the job would be handled.

The fourth factor included pictures of the source alone, assertions about job experience and questions about the newsmaker's family. Assertions about personality had a negative loading, however.

Factor five had a positive loading for pictures with the family and negative loadings for questions about the need for the job and assertions about personality.

The factor loadings tend to cross variable modality (assertion, question, and picture) however; factor two is loaded primarily with assertions and factor three primarily with questions.

Factor score coefficients were used to compute scores for each subject on each factor. Analysis of variance performed on the computed variables produced a significant difference on factor II but not on the others. The significant main effect on factor II for sex of the newsmaker indicated that this pattern of reporting appeared more often when the newsmaker was male than when the newsmaker was female. (See table 7.)

Conclusions

A few words of caution are appropriate in this interpretation of the results. First, no attempt is made to generalize these results to the typical working newsroom. The study was designed to explore whether students display sex bias in their reporting. If such a bias does exist, journalism educators should be aware of it and try to deal with it before these future journalists move into the field.

The data indicate that the blatent stereotyping predicted by the hypotheses did not appear in the news stories, questions or choice of pictures, either on the basis of sex of newsmaker or sex of writer. However, there is a suggestion of a subtle bias in the reporting. Analysis of variance of the stories indicated a greater tendency to use assertions about qualifications for the job when the newsmaker is male. This may indicate the reporters considered the male more qualified for the job and reflected this in their stories.

The tendency of student reporters to ask the female newsmaker questions about sex role and the job seems to indicate a concern about the ability of the woman to handle both traditional and professional roles. Although some journalists may argue that this is a legitimate area of concern, such questions divert the reporter from more substantive aspects of the story such as how the appointee plans to carry out the new job. Besides, males may have difficulty handling both professional and family roles, but this is rarely a matter of concern to the journalist.

The suggestion that student reporters may have asked more factual questions about the job to female newsmakers also seems to be the result of subtle stereotyping, even though contrary to predictions. Qualitative analysis of the questions indicates that they express concern about the woman's ability to handle the job. Some seem to express an underlying concern about whether the female's sex will be a limiting factor in job performance.

The factor analysis of the dependent variables and subsequent analysis of variance of factor coefficient scores adds to the suspicion of bias in the reporting. The pattern of variables in factor II seemed to picture a well-rounded appointee who was qualified for the position, married, engaged in community and leisure activities, and associated with school children. This favorable pattern was more likely to appear in stories about the male newsmaker.

A different type of news story might have produced different results. Appointment of a female to an administrative position in a public school district is not particularly unusual, and the position is not as inconsistent with the traditional female role as some other jobs. One might speculate that the more inconsistent the position, the greater the tendency of journalists, with their penchant for the unusual, to emphasize this inconsistency. If a woman were appointed police chief, for example, reporters might highlight stereotyped attributes inconsistent with the position. Again, the problem is that this type

of material might squeeze out more substantive information such as qualifications for the job and ability to perform its duties.

The issue merits further research. If a journalistic goal is objectivity, it should include equal treatment of men and women.

Table 1
Means and Significance Levels for Hypotheses
About Sex of the Newsmaker

	Hypothesis	Mean Male	Mean Female	S.D.	p	Direction[a]
1.	Assertions about job qualifications	5.25	3.85	2.89	.05	+
2.	Assertions about work experience and schooling	4.66	5.27	2.43	n.s.	-
3.	Assertions about personal worth	1.59	1.73	1.23	n.s.	-
4.	Negative Assertions about the need for the position	2.00	1.97	1.78	n.s.	-
5.	Assertions about sex role	.67	.79	2.64	n.s.	+
6.	Assertions that one is married	.78	.58	.50	n.s.	-
7.	Assertions about personality	.31	.46	.80	n.s.	+
8.	Assertions about leisure and community activities	1.72	1.46	1.36	n.s.	-
9.	Questions about job qualifications	1.25	1.24	1.21	n.s.	-
10.	Questions about how the job would be handled	3.22	4.12	2.69	n.s.	-
11.	Questions about need for the new position	1.07	1.30	.97	n.s.	+
12.	Questions about sex role	.03	.67	.78	.001	+
13.	Questions about spouse, children or family	.84	1.36	1.21	n.s.	+
14.	Factual questions about the job	.78	1.73	1.99	.05	-
15.	Opinions about contemporary job issues	4.34	4.73	3.12	n.s.	-
16.	Questions about leisure and community activities	.97	.94	1.58	n.s.	-
17.	Pictures of the newsmaker alone in office	.72	.73	.53	n.s.	-
18.	Pictures of the newsmaker with a group excluding children	.88	.59	.67	n.s.	-
19.	Pictures of the newsmaker with children	.38	.12	.56	n.s.	-

(continued)

(Table 1 continued)

Hypothesis	Mean Male	Mean Female	S.D.	p	Direction[a]
20. Pictures of the newsmaker with family	.63	.64	.49	n.s.	+
21. Pictures of the newsmaker engaged in leisure or community activities	.44	.52	.64	n.s.	+

[a] A (+) sign indicates the difference between the means is in the direction predicted in the hypothesis while a (-) indicates the difference is in the opposite direction.

Table 2
Analysis of Variance for
Job Qualification Assertions

Source	df	MS	F	p
Sex of Writer (A)	1	.257	.032	n.s.
Sex of Newsmaker (B)	1	32.115	4.001	.05
Interaction (AxB)	1	8.337	1.044	n.s.

Table 3
Analysis of Variance for Questions
About Sex Roles and the Job

Source	df	MS	F	p
Sex of Writer (A)	1	.010	.020	n.s.
Sex of Newsmaker (B)	1	6.569	12.470	.001
Interaction (AxB)	1	.158	.299	n.s.

Table 4

Analysis of Variance for Factual Questions about Job or Job Issues

Source	df	MS	F	p
Sex of Writer (A)	1	.055	.014	n.s.
Sex of Newsmaker (B)	1	14.418	3.706	.05
Interaction (AxB)	1	.653	.168	n.s.

Table 5

Analysis of Variance for Questions About Leisure or Community Activities

Source	df	MS	F	p
Sex of Writer (A)	1	.337	.142	n.s.
Sex of Newsmaker (B)	1	.021	.009	n.s.
Interaction (AxB)	1	13.352	5.611	.02

Table 6

Factor Loadings for Dependent Variables

Variables	I	II	III	IV	V	h^2
Pictures of leisure and community activities	.60					.41
Pictures with a group	-.50					.33
Questions about leisure and community activities	.48					.27
Questions about job opinions	-.45					.32
Assertions about personality	.41			-.42	-.39	.57
Assertions about qualifications		.50				.43
Pictures with children		.50				.40
Assertions that one is married		.44				.25
Assertions about leisure		.42				.21
Questions about need for job			.54		-.41	.53
Questions about how job handled			.54			.36
Questions about job issues			.49			.30
Assertions about need for position			.46			.25
Pictures of source alone				.68		.65
Questions about family				.41		.20
Assertions about experience				.41		.23
Pictures with family					.53	.30
Questions about sex role						.05
Questions about qualifications						.23
Assertions about sex role						.15
Assertions about personal worth						.29
Percent Total Variance	11.4	10.4	9.6	8.4	7.4	47.2

Table 7

Analysis of Variance for Factor II

Source	df	MS	F	p
Sex of Writer (A)	1	.002	.002	n.s.
Sex of Newsmaker (B)	1	5.230	6.281	.01
Interaction (AxB)	1	.105	.126	n.s.

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